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Report Highlights:

Biotechnology is still a relatively new issue in Syria. Yet to be announced legislation may require that vegetable seeds be certified non-genetically modified. This issue has not affected the large volume of corn and soybean exports from the United States to Syria in the past and is not expected to do so in the near future.

Section I. Executive Summary:

The biotechnology issue is still relatively new in Syria. There is only a limited awareness of the issue. The Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform does not yet have instructions regarding biotechnology. Under current regulations, importers of sunflower seeds have to present a certificate stating that the seeds are not genetically modified. According to trade sources, this condition is not enforced for the time being. The United States does not export any sunflower seeds to Syria due to the presence of cheaper sources in Eastern Europe. U.S. exports of corn, soybeans, and soybean meal are not affected by any decisions on biosafety. This is expected to continue in the foreseeable future. Imports of vegetable seeds may be required to be non-genetically modified in the future.

Section II. Biotechnology Trade and Production:

Syria does not produce any biotechnology products, and none are under development. The major agricultural products exported from the United States to Syria are corn, soybeans, soybean meal and vegetable seeds. None of these products require any sort of GMO-free certification.

There are two reasons for this:

1. In the past, the lack of suitable laboratories to check for the presence of GMOs in shipments of corn, soybeans, soybean meal, and vegetable seeds was the main reason. The Central Feed Laboratory of the Syrian Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform that collects samples and approves introducing feed ingredients to the local market did not have the equipment or the expertise to do such tests. However, other specialized research laboratories can now buy kits to detect GMOs.
2. Decision makers at the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform realize that any decision to ban or add additional regulations on imports of genetically modified feed ingredients, imported on a large scale, would lead to increases in feed costs, and eventually higher costs of all animal products, which Syrian consumers already can scarcely afford.

Syria imports large quantities of corn, soybeans, and soybean meal, mainly from the United States and Argentina. A significant part of these two commodities from both origins is genetically engineered. Much smaller quantities of corn come from East European sources. Syria is not a food aid recipient or likely to be so in the near future. Syria does not export nor produce any biotechnology crops that were developed outside the United States.

Section III. New Technologies:

Section IV. Biotechnology Policy:

The major decision maker is the General Authority for Agricultural Research in the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform. The Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Environment do not currently have a large role in this field. A biosafety committee has been established. This committee is formed of members from the Ministry of Higher Education, Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform (the General Authority of Agricultural Research), Ministry of Environment, Ministry of Health, and the Atomic Energy Authority.

According to the General Authority for Agricultural Research that submits the recommendations to the higher authorities to make the final decision, genetically modified organisms will not be prohibited from import if they will be used as a feed ingredient or as a raw material for the local industry. However, some restrictions will be imposed on the imports of any commodity that is going to be imported for planting in Syria. This new policy was expected to be issued a few years ago, but has not yet been announced. Informally, the General Authority for Agricultural Research has indicated that some recommendations have been submitted, and a decision will be made regarding the imports of genetically modified organisms. No such decision has been taken until

now. When finally decided, the decision may take more time to be implemented.

There are no rules in place or proposed related to coexistence between biotechnology and non-biotechnology crops.

Under the Greater Arab Free Trade Agreement (GAFTA) that went into effect on January 1, 2005, processed foods are permitted to be imported from Arab countries that have ratified the agreement. In addition, processed food products are being permitted to be imported from all sources. Prevailing labeling instructions do not provide for any requirement to include anything on the label regarding biotechnology.

Syria signed and ratified the Biosafety Protocol by Decree 9 of January 29, 2004. The Biosafety Committee is responsible for taking any necessary actions to ensure compliance with the protocol.

To date, there are no biotechnology-related trade barriers that hurt U.S. exports. The new legislation, when announced, is not expected to affect bulk commodities exports from the United States to Syria for use as feed, crushing and other industrial uses. Economics will be the major force behind continuing with the current policy. Exporters of vegetable seeds may be required to provide a certificate that the seeds are not genetically modified.

Section V. Marketing:

In general, the average consumer is not concerned about biotechnology. The general trend is that if the product is acceptable to be consumed in the country of origin, it should be acceptable to be consumed by the local consumer.

Section VI. Capacity Building and Outreach:

Syrian officials and Egyptian officials meet once a year. Egypt is considered to be a leader in the field of biotechnology in the region. As such, on regulatory approvals, Syria will likely follow the same path as Egypt, but with a few years delay.